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ABSTRACT

This paper contends that teaching students about the dangers of weak communication methodology allows them the opportunity to not accept such studies at face value. The paper details the use in an introductory mass communication course of a study of newspaper coverage concerning the 1969 Santa Barbara, California, oil spill. The paper's close examination of the methodology used suggests that the theoretical basis behind the study is inherently flawed by the use of content analysis which, in this case, leads to simplistic and unwarranted judgments by the researchers regarding how the media were used by oil company executives and Nixon administration officials. It further finds that conclusions were drawn which go far beyond actual content, so that students learning about theory and methodology cannot be pleased at the incorrect conclusions drawn by this study. (Contains 2 references.) (NKA)

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"A Mass Communication Research Failure: Deriving Unsubstantiated Conclusions from Misleading Data."

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It is important that students of Mass Communication understand that research in the field, or well-meaning case studies, can often be flawed in methodology or approach. In-depth evaluations of certain theories can prove instructive in showing such errors. In my MCOM 1003/Introduction to Mass Communication course, the following research example is used as an instructional unit concerning faulty theory. Teaching students about the dangers of weak communication methodology allows them the opportunity to not accept such studies at face value. Excellent student-centered roundtables discussing these and other ideas make them better media analysts.

On its face, the findings of Molotch and Lester in their study of newspaper coverage concerning the 1969 Santa Barbara, California oil spill appear sound. However, the theoretical basis behind the study is inherently flawed. Their use of content analysis in this instance leads them to make simplistic, unwarranted judgments regarding how they conclude the media was used by oil company executives and Nixon administration officials. Molotch and Lester also limit the area of study, leading to inevitable conclusions. As a result, Accidental News: The Great Oil Spill as Local Occurrence and National Event is a bad, although often quoted, piece of mass communication research.

It is a sophisticated content analysis study. Nonetheless,

it reveals shortcomings of the methodological and theoretical assumptions of this type of research. McQuail warns about using content analysis as a basis of inquiry. He says on page 175, "Despite these cautionary words, it is true that students (and theorists) of mass media have a weakness for generalizing about media content, beyond reasonable limits... Nevertheless, one has to be clear about the shifting and sometimes shaky foundations of content analysis on which much generalization about mass communication rests." According to McQuail's definition, Molotch and Lester limit the stylized concepts of their study in a way which oversimplifies the data they collect. Findings from such an approach can be just plain wrong.

The Santa Barbara oil spill helped to sensitize Americans about the ecological movement in a dramatic way. A great deal of broadcast and print media attention was given to the spill and its aftermath. Newspapers and television showed dramatic images of waterfowl and beaches saturated with oil as a result of the Union Oil platform spill. This helped to raise the consciousness level of the public about the dangers of Pacific off-shore drilling.

What Molotch and Lester are attempting to do is look at the news coverage of the oil spill. They want to see how the news about it was played both in the local and national print press. However, they begin their article with an odd assumption. They

say on pages 235 and 236, "Borrowing from the ethnomethodological perspective, we suspend, for strategic analytical purposes, the assumption that there is any objective reality "out there" to be reported and instead see news as the very processes through which are created - for news professionals and their audiences - the "things" which are important."

What is the consequence of this interesting statement? "For strategic purposes," the researchers are not going to concern themselves with what actually happened. They are assuming there are many occurrences going on in the world, which in actuality can be anything, but only some of them made news. This creates a problem. How can one compare content to reality if that reality has been suspended for purposes of the study? What can content be compared to? It is nonsensical logic.

They get around this problem in a unique manner. Molotch and Lester found that the local newspaper, the Santa Barbara News-Press, ran a total of 598 stories about the oil spill and its aftermath in a two-year period. Instead of evaluating all of these stories, the researchers randomly selected a sample of 195 stories. Presumably, these selected stories would be representative of the oil spill story coverage as a whole. According to Molotch and Lester, the 598 Santa Barbara News-Press stories measured the reality of the oil spill.

How much of this "reality" was covered outside of Santa

Barbara? Were stories filtering into the American mass media? To discover this, the researchers took another 20 newspapers, selected by market size and area, for evaluation purposes. If these newspapers had printed all 195 stories (the purported perfect view of reality), more than 3900 articles about the oil spill would have been published. This did not happen, as only some of the stories were picked up by other newspapers.

The researchers broke down Santa Barbara oil spill stories published into four periods of time. The periods concluded on the following dates: February 21, 1969; June 30, 1969; December 1, 1969; and December 31, 1970. Predictably, most national news interest came in the wake of the oil spill. The arbitrary base sample of 195 stories was used to see how the story played out in the long run. A look at the categorization of national press coverage indicates that a lack of geographic proximity was a factor in later stories not being published. The aspect of news judgment was an obvious factor here.

However, Molotch and Lester run into a major problem when they begin to classify events. Each story was classified by means of a three-word sentence. These blurbs could include such items as "Nixon inspects beaches" and "Conservationists present petition." What they were attempting was to justify the nature of news events in short phrases. Each story was coded in this fashion by undergraduate research assistants. Once all of the

stories had been coded in this fashion, conclusions could be drawn.

It was determined by Molotch and Lester that conservationists received little coverage as disclosed in a table on page 244, "Percentage of Occurrence Subjects to Become Events." Indeed, the simplification of oil spill stories into short subject headings skews the importance of national officials such as President Nixon and Interior Secretary Hickel. Conservationists drove the story and its aftermath, an aspect that could not be discovered by merely scratching the surface and writing down subjects which appeared in lead paragraphs of news stories. By looking at this narrow notion of subject, the results are off.

The findings regarding national press coverage of the spill could be considered alarming. In the Santa Barbara News-Press, occurrences involving oil companies as subjects as compared to conservationists was roughly equal. This would indicate a nice balance of oil versus environmental interests. However, when all other papers are counted, almost 85% of stories involved oil companies as subjects. Does this suggest something unfair is taking place in the national media? Molotch and Lester say that oil companies have greater access to the national mass media than do conservationists. The inference is that conservationists had little media clout after the initial scare of the spill.

Was the coverage biased in favor of industry concerns? In fact, oil spill story coverage was basically focused on environmental concerns. What Molotch and Lester have is apparently an objective method, but reach conclusions at variance from the facts. One reason for this is the simplification of stories into short statements. The researchers also incorrectly assumed that all oil company stories were positive when they were not. This study also assumed that all conservationists were pro-ecological when they were not. In fact, the environmental movement consists of a number of factions.

There is also a problem in the study with the notion of access. Those in positions to get things done, such as administration or oil company officials, will get more access to reporters. However, journalists must fight to get that access. The reporter initiates contact with the source. It is not all that easy to obtain quick access to government or corporation officials. The oil spill story was driven by environmentalists, but they fought from the outside in, as they did not wield direct governmental power.

For purposes of the study, the oil spill did not exist. It was suspended from the discussion. However, it was the spread of the oil slick that got reporters interested in the first place. If that part was ignored, and researchers evaluated only what the media had reported, the results should not come as a surprise.

This becomes more important when considering the simplification of stories into subject-based statements.

What does all this mean? The article tells us nothing about the true journalistic focus of the Santa Barbara oil spill. It is a superficial study. The content analysis was further simplified by looking at headlines of national newspapers. As McQuail has stated, conclusions are drawn which go far beyond actual content. The Molotch and Lester article is methodologically flawed. Journalists, mass communication scholars, and introductory students learning about theory and methodology cannot be pleased at the incorrect conclusions drawn by this study.

References

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